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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how staff at McKendree College in Illinois are working to improve student teachers' visual and verbal literacy skills as part of a children's literature class. It explains the importance of visual literacy in teaching and learning within diverse classrooms and the need for children to express themselves with writing and art, so teachers must understand literature and appreciate how art can be used with it. Preservice teachers at McKendree College are given the opportunity to use art as a means of sharing points of view. They are asked to read the beach scene from "Gulliver's Travels," brainstorm, create thumbnail sketches, journal from three different characters' perspectives, and complete one, more finished, drawing. The college has found that many preservice teachers have great difficulty accomplishing these tasks because they feel they have no art skills. It is important for them to learn that their own students will have a variety of skills and functional capabilities and disabilities, but that will not keep them from being artists unless they are told by their teachers that they are not able to be artists. (Contains 13 references.) (SM)

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Preparing Pre-service Teachers for Tomorrow: Is Visual Literacy a Necessary Component?

By

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February 25, 2002
New York, New York

Visiting a classroom in the United States today is like visiting an international school of yesterday. It is not unusual for today's classrooms to have a number of different cultures, ethnic groups, religions, and social-economic levels within a group of 25 children. The U.S. Census Bureau projections suggest that by 2050, people of color will be the new majority in America.

We expect our teachers to understand and relate to each child. To meet the needs of the children in our classrooms with different needs and different experiences, we must recognize that there are many ways for children to learn and acquire knowledge (Sweet, 1997). Eisner (1994) discusses multiple forms of literacy noting the students' ability to construct, diversify and deepen meaning. For students to construct meaning they must be skilled in a variety of forms including picture, music, dance and words.

"Visual literacy means increased visual intelligence" (Dondis, 1973, p. 185). This means an easier understanding of all meaning that takes visual form. Verbal literacy is the ability to "carry out the complex tasks using reading and writing related to the world of work and to life outside of school" (Cases in Literacy, 1989, p. 36). Comprehension is the construction of meaning, and it is the goal of reading (Tompkins, G., 1997, p. 31). "Visual decisions dominate a great deal of what we exam and recognize even in reading (Dondis, 1973, p. 185).

Our goal as teachers is to create a literate society. One way we evaluate students in our schools to see if they are becoming literate citizens is to measure comprehension on standardized tests. We are concerned when scores are low. We know that readers construct meaning by making connections to previous information learned and read (Rumelhart, 1981).

As children read, we provide lessons and opportunities for them to think more deeply about characters, visualize settings and reflect on events in the story. The integration of visual and verbal expression provides a more complete picture of communication. Both the visual and the language arts are necessary and essential dimensions for every child's education if we are to educate the whole child (Sweet, 1997).

Drawing in the classroom, however, and encouraging visual comprehension are often add-on activities. Students are allowed to draw a picture if they complete the writing assignment (Johnson, 1997). It is believed that children have the natural desire to draw (Wilson & Wilson, 1982) and to write (Calkins, 1986). Using verbal and written literacy, young children are taught and encouraged to share their ideas and thoughts with others. The Task Force on Children's Learning and the Arts (1998) noted that children learn more in these content areas when art is integrated.

Long before value judgment terms such as "creative" are applied to language and writing, it is expected that educated people become proficient in reading and writing. Not all are expected to become brilliant (Dondis, 1973). If students are having problems with verbal literacy, they are given additional help. However, children and adults have the expectations that if their drawing skills are not good then they should not be used. Therefore, visual literacy is ignored or intentionally omitted so those skills do not have to be exercised.

If we see visual literacy as a necessary component to becoming educated in all areas, visual literacy should be taught just as verbal literacy is taught. Dondis, (1973) stated that visual literacy could be achieved through a similar approach as verbal literacy.

Just as teachers teach the ABCs when children are learning verbal literacy, children should learn the simplest units of visual literacy, the elements. To foster the verbal and visual mode, time and involvement, analysis and practice are necessary for both modes.

The political climate is continuing to change as more and more emphasis is placed on test scores. Pressure from sources outside the school's system, such as legislators, is being placed on administrators and teachers to raise scores. Test scores can determine funding schools will receive in the future. As a result of the emphasis on the basics to raise scores, areas such as art are being eliminated from the curriculum of many schools but is gaining momentum in others where art has been proven to promote a more substantive understanding of subject area and therefore meeting standards prescribed by the state (Education Week, 2000). A study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's National Educational Longitudinal Study found that students who participated in arts often outperformed their peers who did not participate in the arts. The results were found regardless of socio-economic status (Catterall, 1998)

There is a need for children to express themselves with writing and with art. For many children, art is their strength. Classroom teachers should have an understanding of literature and an appreciation of how art can be used with it. Olson, 1997, stated that the artist and author communicate their stories by their own art form yet the creative process for each is very similar. Many students, however, no longer receive the training and opportunities to visually express themselves. As a result, we are not educating the whole child.

Each semester over the last two years, we have experimented with improving visual and verbal literacy skills as part of the children's literature class at McKendree

College. Pre-service teachers are given the opportunity to use art as a means to share points of view. The students are asked to read the beach scene from Gulliver's Travels, brainstorm, create thumbnail sketches and journal from three different character's perspectives and complete one, more finished, drawing.

We have found that many of the pre-service teachers have a difficult time doing this. It appears that many McKendree pre-service teachers decided at an early age that they are not artists and do not have arts skills that are developed enough to engage in arts activities. The pre-service teachers, therefore, are given permission by the professors to be artists for the day. It is important for the pre-service teachers to recognize their students will have a variety of skills and functional capabilities and disabilities and that will not keep them from being artists, either, unless they, as teachers, tell the children they are not artists or can not do certain things.

Many students' foremost idea in illustrating this scene is to do a representational drawing. Therefore, the week before the guest lecturer comes to class, students are introduced to Gulliver's Travels and asked to visualize the scene of Gulliver shipwrecked on the Lilliputians' beach. The pre-service teachers are then guided through creating a representational drawing of this scene in hopes that the initial desire to create this type of drawing is out of the way.

The following week, the pre-service teachers are then to focus on illustrating the scene from Gulliver's perspective and the Lilliputians' perspective. After the thumbnail sketches are completed, we have intensive discussions with each of the students in reviewing their thumbnails and selecting a "best solution" to the creative problem solving

assignment. After students select one thumbnail and complete a more finished drawing they must show their work to the class and talk about what they have done and why.

Concerns we have had and continue to have are that many of the pre-service teachers are not familiar with the story, *Gulliver's Travels*. Secondly, they must be guided through the brainstorming process before beginning their thumbnail sketches. We have found that students that do not brainstorm do not "think outside the box" and often illustrate another, casual observer, representational drawing of the scene. Thirdly, many students want to know why the assignment is important? The importance of visualizing from different perspectives is not intuitive to them. This information is literally explained to the pre-service teachers, but those that continue to have a difficult time creating the thumbnails from different perspectives question the need and purpose of the exercise.

As we continue to study visual literacy, we hope to videotape the classes so others can see the classroom dynamics. We also want to document the frustration and verbalizing of negative thoughts as the pre-service teachers engage in the activity. Changes in the classroom instruction have and will include more writing from different perspectives by the pre-service teachers.

For more information on visual literacy and examples of work collected by students, visit our website at http://www.mckendree.edu/Division_Edu/visual_literacy/default.htm. The following page has additional information on ways to connect to our website.

There are several ways to connect to our website hosted by McKendree College. The URL for the site is

<http://www.mckendree.edu/Division_Edu/visual_literacy/default.htm>.

You may also go through the Holman Library website by entering the section on "About the Library" at

< <http://www.mckendree.edu/library/mission.htm>>. Under Bill Harroff's name, you will see two research project links. "Visual Literacy" is the children's literature class project. You might also be interested in (r)Evolutionary (e)Books, dealing with the rise of electronic book formats.

Finally, you will find McKendree College's Education Division website at http://www.mckendree.edu/Division_Edu/. Click on the "Visual Literacy" option.

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